

University of Groningen

Wie geen vreemde talen kent, weet niets van zijn eigen taal

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11. Multilingualism: Obligatory at first, fun at last

Interviews with multilingual students

By Eva-Maria Schnelten

Multilingualism has become a very broad phenomenon in today's society. Through globalisation and the possibilities of travelling, migration, trade and the media, it has become much easier to get in touch with other people, cultures and, of course, languages. The situation, especially in multilingual societies, has changed over the last decades. Intercultural contact has shaped up to a very steady component of everyday life. To get a better grasp on what the effects of languages and multilingualism really are in our day-to-day lives, I conducted an interview with three female students of the University of Groningen, all native speakers of German. Their answers and stories brought better insight into what really counts in language acquisition.

Language Acquisition stories from Germany and Switzerland

The students interviewed were Kathrin ¹(21) and Anna (22) from Germany and Marie (23) from Switzerland. German or Swiss German is their native language, but all of them studied English and French in school. Two of them also took Spanish lessons and one of the girls is voluntarily learning Italian through the help of a friend. In September 2011, they started their Dutch course at the University in Groningen which takes place twice a week.

First let's take a look at the educational background concerning languages in both countries in general. School is one of most common learning environments for learning new languages. Since Germany only has one official language, most of the pupils get in touch with a foreign language for the first time at school. Bilingual education is not unheard of, but it usually takes place in families with multicultural backgrounds or multilingual parents. The first contact with English is usually established in primary school. Yet the actual education of English as a foreign language, with explicit instruction on grammar and phonology, starts with the beginning of secondary school. After two years, a second foreign language is mandatory at the Gymnasium. Depending on the size and location of the school, the range of languages goes from French, Dutch or Russian to Spanish or Italian.

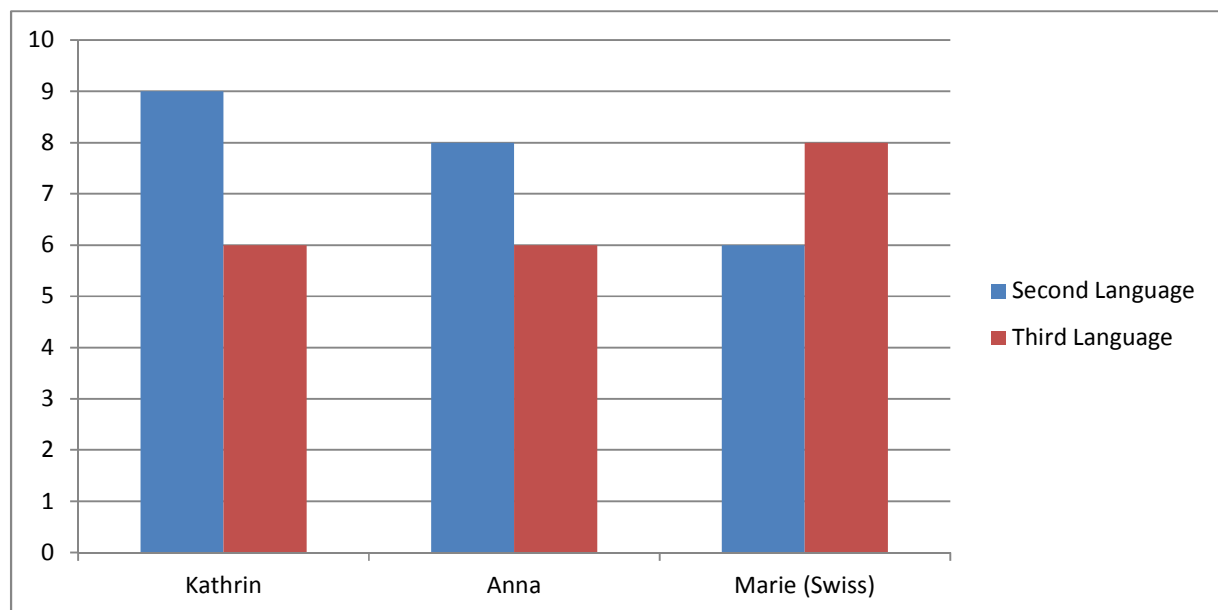
However, the situation in Switzerland is somewhat different. Switzerland not only has more than one official language, it also contains a variation of the German language, Swiss German. Swiss German differs from German in many key aspects such as vocabulary, phonology and even some grammar. Next to Swiss German, also French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romanic are spoken in Switzerland.

A multilingual country not only represents a rich heritage in culture, it also differs in the educational aspects. According to Marie, it is necessary for every Swiss citizen to speak at least two languages. For most people in Switzerland these languages are Swiss German and French. In school, two foreign languages are mandatory. Marie took classes in French and English.

¹ These names are pseudonyms for privacy reasons

Proficiency and Travelling around the world

All three students learned English in school and French or Spanish as another foreign language. On self-evaluation, on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being very bad and 10 being fluent in the language, they all scored themselves between 8 and 9 in English. Moreover, all of them scored their proficiency of the third language around 6.



Self-evaluation of interviewees concerning their proficiency

Surprisingly, Marie also evaluated her English to be better than her French, although French was her second language and English her third. Even more important, she comes from a bilingual region consisting of Swiss German and French speaking inhabitants. Basically, all of the interviewees rate their skill of proficiency for English relatively high and for Spanish and French relatively low.

The three students all spent a lot of time abroad. This adds to the assumption that through the globalisation, multilingualism has become very important. Marie for example grew up in a bilingual environment in a multilingual country, so the contact with different languages and everything it entails was established early. Although she did not grow up bilingually, she spoke Swiss German at home, learned High German in school as the lingua franca, took French as second language and English as third language. Finally, after school, she even took one and a half years of Spanish. Now that she is doing her semester abroad in the Netherlands, she chose to learn Dutch as well. Marie also spent two months in Canada and is planning on doing an internship in France during her Bachelor's degree to improve her French.

Anna has a very interesting history concerning her linguistic background. When she was in secondary school, she took English as a second and Spanish as a third language. At this young age, she could not cope with the challenges of learning a new language, so she had to repeat a grade due to failing in the language courses. Through the following years she grew fond of the

languages, despite the negative experience. She spent a semester in New Zealand, took a summer course in England and went on a school exchange to Sweden. After school, she went back to New Zealand for 9 months.

Kathrin, just as Anna, took English and French as languages in school and is now following the Dutch course after having lived in Groningen for two semesters. One year of secondary school she spent on a school in Australia, which she describes as the main reason for her proficiency level of English. She also worked in Paris for five weeks in 2011 which helped improve her French a lot.

Evidently, the contact between foreigners and natives can be established easily by travelling the world, especially if they speak the same language. The students share this opinion. That is why they all signed up for the Dutch course at the Language Center. Learning the language of the country of residence was a big part of the decision making process. According to all of them, it is rude and impudent to just assume all Dutch speak German or English, so the girls are trying their best to at least learn the basics of the language. So far, it has been a good experience, but all of them indicated that the proficiency could be improved over the next few months.

A Question of Motivation

During the interview, an important thought came to mind: learning languages seems to be dependent on not only talent, but mainly on the learner's motivation. All three students said to be interested in learning languages and that their motivation is the key to their success. The learner needs to ask himself: how badly do I want to learn the language? Did I ever have contact with the language before? What are my past experiences with the language, the native speakers or the country where it is spoken? What are my goals? What can I reach with adding that language to my linguistic repertoire? – These are all questions of utmost importance. Having a gift for languages can be of great help in language acquisition, but it does not eliminate the success of studying out of interest. People without the talent are most likely to succeed in their ways, as long as they are motivated and devoted to the challenge (Dörnyei, Z., 1998).

All three students said to be interested in learning languages and that their motivation is the key to their success.

There certainly are other factors that influence the success in learning languages as well, such as communicative competence and skills, but during the talk with the students the motivational aspect came up several times. Also, the personal judgment of the skills is important. People that tend to underestimate their talent for certain things are unlikely to succeed and reach their goals. Furthermore, the students indicated that they possess an enormous amount of curiosity for other languages and cultures- all of them are planning on doing more internships or semesters abroad and might even consider taking a job that implies travelling and/ or international communication on a regular basis. Of course it is important to develop a realistic view on how the learning is going, how it has improved and what factors might be holding one back and have to be eliminated. The situation and the learning environment play a huge role as well. One is more likely to accomplish a task in an environment that makes one feel secure. If, for example, the teacher criticised one's work permanently, the self-esteem concerning language skills is harmed. Once

that is happened, it is very hard for the person to re-invigorate and restore their self-esteem. That is why self-awareness is so important (Williams and Burden, 1997).

Foreign Languages - Prestige or necessity?

As mentioned before, multilingualism has become essential over the past decades. Especially the media have a big influence on language development. TV series and movies from abroad, the international music industry and social networking all have their effects on language learning. In times of intercultural communication, it is easier to acquire information from across the world through the internet. The economy and international trade are based on many different languages and make multilingualism inevitable.

What do our interviewees think about that? All three students said that their opinion about multilingualism is very positive. Multilingualism is something you cannot avoid; you find different languages and foreign words in advertisements, commercials, TV and everywhere on the internet. According to them, it has become mandatory for their generation to speak more than one language. It's necessary to improve the success in international communication and to provide a smooth co-existence of the different people within one nation, but also between countries. "Understanding other communities and making integration for foreign people or immigrants easier are two very important advantages of multilingualism. It also shows respect and curiosity towards other cultures." according to Marie.

Another reason the students brought up is the international job market. "Speaking different languages increases your chances to most of the professions in our society", says Kathrin. Furthermore, it is obligatory for applicants in the cross- cultural field of work. It shows your abilities to understand other people better, but according to many researchers, multilingualism also gives you a better grasp of your own native language and linguistic aspects in general.

Marie: "Understanding other communities and making integration for foreign people or immigrants easier are two very important advantages of multilingualism. It also shows respect and curiosity towards other cultures."

However, there are also disadvantages that the students are concerned with.

Thinking about getting to know other cultures and societies brought to mind the loss of the own cultural heritage. One can feel the borders of the own linguistic repertoire become blurry the more languages one speaks. Closely related to this problem is the mixing of languages, or the so called code switching. Some linguists argue that code switching impurifies the language and that it influences the language system of the mother tongue negatively. The students said they did not have the impression that the other languages influence their native language, but they certainly noticed the interference and impact.

The importance of multilingualism is self-explanatory. But is it just used out of necessity, or can it be used as a sign of higher education and prestige? The choice of language often displays the character and identity of a person, but people also tend to adapt themselves and their behaviour to their environment. Talking in dialects, accents or styles is not always an indication of showing off the abilities, but it happens to many people unconsciously. Marie described this phenomenon as "circumstantial application of the linguistic knowledge". She

talks High German with her German friends, but Swiss German at home and with her Swiss friends without really thinking about the language choice.

No picnic – problems with foreign language acquisition

Second language acquisition is a challenge to many people. There are many problems one can encounter while doing just that. Learning completely new grammatical rules represents an enormous task. In addition, the second language will in all likelihood contain different sounds than one is used to from their mother tongue. Variables such as intonation or unfamiliar phonemes can display an issue that is not easily overcome. Two of the students, Anna and Marie, mentioned that the pronunciation of foreign languages is one of their biggest problems. They also described this problem as the main reason for their inhibition to speak that language. On top of that, all of the students indicated that the pronunciation of Dutch has been the main obstacle hindering them from freely communicating with the locals in their environment. They don't feel comfortable enough to try.

As mentioned before, the learner has to acquire a whole new set of rules. Especially the vocabulary has to be learned by heart. So in conclusion, learning a new language is a task that demands a lot of commitment and requires devotion. That can cause problems. Marie, Anna, as well as Kathrin said that the lack of motivation to study the vocabulary and grammar especially outweighs their interest of the language on a regular basis.

The effect of negative experiences is just as influential. Criticism influences the whole feeling towards the language and makes the learner doubt their abilities, even if they do have measurable skills concerning language acquisition. The motivation is impaired and the self-esteem is damaged. Overcoming those negative comments takes a while, restoring the faith in oneself even longer. In contrast Anna who failed in English and Spanish in secondary school has overcome this experience and gained confidence over the last years. According to her the months abroad particularly helped her tremendously. "After my experiences with English at school, I just didn't dare to speak. But in New Zealand I just started speaking because I had to. Compared to the other foreign students, I had a better starting level, so I never got the feeling I should rather not speak English."



Multilingualism – positive impressions

Once the students got to think about multilingualism, no negative effects or impressions on their linguistic abilities were mentioned. Although there might occur some slight problems that go alongside with speaking different languages like the struggle of learning a new grammatical system and vocabulary, the positive attitude towards multilingualism has a reason. The students, but also researchers share the opinion that the ability to speak more languages not only helps to understand other people and cultures better, but also lets one discover their own skills and raises the awareness towards a great many things. So, should one consider learning

another language? From a sociological, psychological and linguistic point of view it is highly encouraged. It represents the opportunity to get in touch with an interesting ability humans are capable of.

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